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Book Review:

**Jonathan Reinarz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Urbana,
Chicago, and Springfield, 2014)**

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Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (2014), xi + 279 (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, £57.00/\$90.00, £15.99/\$25.00 paperback).

Jonathan Reinartz's *Past Scents* sets itself the intimidating task of surveying existing literature on the history of the sense of smell from the ancient world to the present, twenty years after the introduction *Aroma* by Classen, Howes, and Synnott. It ambitiously ranges between examples as diverse as fifth-century Byzantium and contemporary Columbia, with thematic chapters presenting different prisms for examining the history of smell. Four of these chapters address how smell, both in terms of a person's capacity to detect smell and the smell they are themselves perceived to emit, has historically functioned to differentiate people in race, gender, and class terms, and to order relations between humans and the divine. The remaining two chapters examine the evolution of the perfume industry and the way that city inhabitants developed olfactory imaginaries of their environments and in the nineteenth century launched 'deodorization' campaigns to clean up cities when offensive smells became intolerable.

Reinartz argues that while the physiological capacity to smell has probably changed little over the centuries covered, the meaning ascribed to smells and their attendant function in ordering social relations and constituting identities markedly varied between time and place. By excavating divergent attitudes towards the use of incense in Reformation worship – Martin Luther permitted it while Jean Calvin proscribed it – historians can for example nuance accounts of the new relationships being forged between believers and the divine, relationships mediated by a symbolic

realm of smell. In this respect Reinartz treats the senses as representations regulating a social reality ‘behind’ them, a paradigm that sensory history has not quite wrestled free from. This has benefits and disadvantages. At one level it highlights the cultural specificity of meaning associated with smell, allowing extra-European examples to complicate received European paradigms. At another level it is predicated on an ahistorical distinction between representation and physiological ‘reality’ that overlooks their historically-specific construction as categories and subsequent co-constitution.

However, *Past Scents* also finds space for gentle reorientations of histories of smell. There is a welcome call to look beyond exceptionally foul or fragrant smells towards more mundane ones. Although making the point, *pace* William Hazlitt, that middle-class writers differentiated themselves from lower orders through claims that they were not tainted by malodorous employment and consequently preserved their olfactory acuity, Reinartz deploys Émile Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877) to show both that nineteenth-century laundresses encountered a range of smell gradations and may even have refined their olfaction to aid sorting laundry. There is also an intriguing new perspective given to the well-trodden ground of how nineteenth-century public health reforms associated unpleasant odours, unsanitary conditions, and cholera. By examining the work of the Bacteriological Institute of São Paulo established in 1893, an opening is provided into the extra-European inflection of recent bacteriological theories, particularly Robert Koch’s identification of the cholera agent, and the effect this had on South American associations between smell and disease. Koch’s discovery of the cholera bacterium contributed towards the eclipse of olfactory identification of disease agents in favour of microscopic identification, as well as of ‘the zymotic theory of disease, which presumed that smells themselves caused illness’

(201). Despite this change, when bacteriological investigation proved impractical American colonizers of the Philippines continued to racially differentiate themselves from Filipinos, presumed to be primary disease carriers, in terms of smell by enforcing latrine use through interwar public health reforms. Although the point is not pushed, an invitation is presented for research into the reciprocal modulation of bacteriological theories and the associations made between smell, disease and racial difference by the colonized themselves.

As might be expected, the ride is a little shaky when Reinarz goes far beyond his normal domain of nineteenth-century medical history. At times the narrative falls into enumerating de-contextualized examples that are a stretch to stitch together into persuasive arguments about smell – for example the link between the ancient Persian king Ahaseurus and Sigmund Freud on female hysteria in a brief section on the role that smell played in both enhancing female attractiveness and posing a perceived gender-specific threat to health. This can have the unfortunate effect of consigning the history of smell to an illustrative role rather than a tool for analyzing the processes generating gender constructions. More often, though, the study comes closer to the latter, as is the case in the explanation of how perfume could both fix and destabilize gender categories when associated with early twentieth-century queer men.

Reinarz is most assured when his synthesis is punctuated by suggestive primary research. Analyzing the role of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century brewery ‘smellers’, employed to determine whether ale casks were rotten and required maintenance, he demonstrates a complex interaction between smell and the distribution and production of ale as wooden casks were replaced by aluminum ones, diminishing the ‘smeller’s’ role, and then bottles, which to some extent preserved it.

Smell is shown here to have a constitutive role in economic transformation, rather than only being confined to the sphere of identity-forming representations.

What this adds up to is a survey that reproduces the strengths and weaknesses of historiography on smell while occasionally pointing the way to fruitful new areas of study. The sensory construction of identities is well represented, as is the history of perfume, which makes an appearance in several chapters. At times Reinartz slips into treating smell as more reflective than constitutive of social change and does not, beyond the introduction, historicize the relation between the body, mind, and ‘soul’ to show its interaction with specific meanings of smell. Although the model of ‘deodorization’ in European cities is problematized, it is nonetheless upheld to explain the pre-Alain Corbin absence of histories of smell, seemingly in order to justify their present importance (209-210). This is a pity because Reinartz otherwise demonstrates that the historiography of smell does not have to justify itself through calling attention to its former absence but can show how smell shaped religious, economic, colonial, gender, and urban transformation. Where *Past Scents* repeats these mishaps it highlights the need for a methodological overhaul in areas of the historiography of smell that have changed little since *Aroma*, but where it moves beyond them, as it mostly does, it provides a useful critical introduction.

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